

WORKSHOP REPORT: DOWNTOWN/ FREETOWN- PORT RICO

May 5, 2016
Rosa Parks
Transportation Center



Our voice. Our vision.



**EVANGELINE
CORRIDOR
INITIATIVE**

Funded in part by a federal **TIGER** grant

DISTRICT

Downtown/Freetown-Port Rico

LOCATION

Rosa Parks Transportation Center – May 5, 2016 (5:30pm – 9pm)

WORKSHOP TEAM

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Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the Author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the FHWA.

OVERVIEW

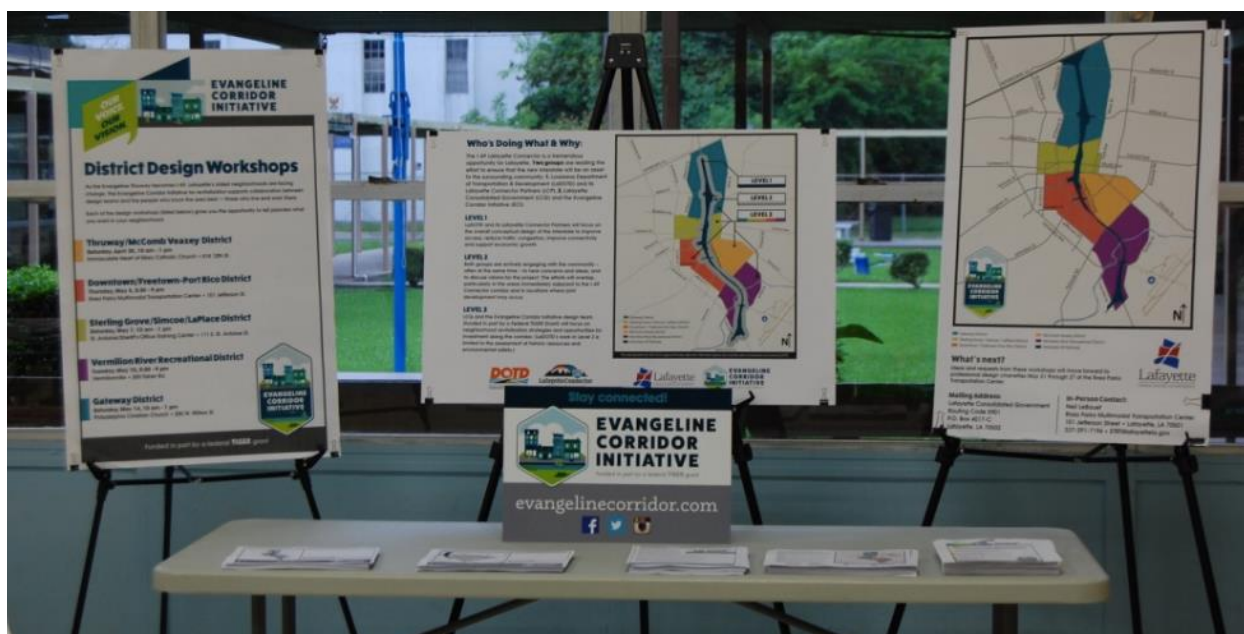
The purpose of the District Design Workshops was to bring together the communities adjacent to the existing Evangeline Thruway to lay the groundwork for developing a comprehensive future vision and plan for a renewed Evangeline Corridor. There is a great need for an extensive planning initiative to

improve the districts at the neighborhood level, while linking them through a response to the unique environment that will be created by the anticipated I-49 Connector.

This Workshop Report is part of a series of five (5) district-based reports, each highlighting feedback gathered in five (5) separate 3-hour long community outreach events. The report(s) reflect the highly engaged open conversations that capture the concerns, aspirations, and suggestions that surfaced throughout various exercises led by facilitators along with groups of local neighborhood residents, business/property owners, and interested parties.

The report is divided into categories related to the overall planning effort that emerged directly from table conversations and exercises. Based around ideas of opportunities and challenges the elements include but are not limited to *economic development, culture and history, entertainment, safety, infrastructure, beautification, housing, recreation and environment and community*. A final section of the Report focuses on *Connector-Related Feedback* that serves as feedback that is collected by the ECI Team and delivered to the DOTD's Lafayette Connector Partners Team.

Lafayette Consolidated Government and the entire ECI team would like to express great appreciation to all those who participated in the workshops and shared the invaluable feedback that forms the basis of this report. The synthesized information contained herein directly informed the Charrette efforts and ultimately the plans and strategies designed for the neighborhoods and communities of each district.





ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The general consensus is that while there is certainly activity in the downtown core, there could be an increase of economic, commercial activity and a reduction of certain kinds of activity. People spoke to the heyday of downtown by commenting on what was once there and how much it was enjoyed. They recognize based on varying degrees of perception that there is ample opportunity for downtown to be a thriving scene. Today the overarching sentiment is that there is a focus on nightlife entertainment that is not representative of the area's goals and in a growing instance of cases, has created more problems for police and safety than is desirable.

The biggest widespread request and discussion focused on the need for a grocery store and/or fresh produce market in the area. People understand this could be a small market space for daily use by downtown residents and workers as well as adjacent neighborhoods, including UL students (a question was asked about an extension of the Horse Farm Saturday Market – this was attempted as a Wednesday evening version but hasn't caught on in a big way). But ultimately, residents desire a big box grocery retail.

An increase and convenience for retail options was cited highly. It was implied by many participants that Downtown was more a destination to visit rather than a quick one-stop. Locals, as well as tourists and the locals that serve them have a sense that there needs to be "more to do" – a package of activity including various means of local and regional shopping, eating and entertainment (e.g. a small art house cinema was mentioned). The need for variety was stressed. Participants recognize that these might be specific business examples, but it paints a picture of the type of place and development that the area is wanting. Incentives to start businesses was discussed – tax incentives for Downtown and Freetown, local stimulus programs, and public/private partnerships. Funding options are key.

There is a sense that the character of Downtown is lost between the charm of the day (what it is and could be) and the free-for-all of the nighttime crowd. This disparity is seen as a major detriment to establishing stability for commercial and residential development and investment. The perception needs to change as to what is possible, but the very real problems need to be addressed. It was acknowledged that part of this rests on the city's shoulders and that efforts are underway but the public wants results after years of failure.

There are vacant parking lots and land surrounding downtown that spark an interest for development. These properties currently remain blighted and unused parcels. Participants acknowledge that different forms of development, such as denser large-scale residential, are desired but there are obstacles and uncertainties with this. Large abandoned sites like the federal courthouse or the Evangeline Hotel were mentioned as prime opportunities for redevelopment and/or renovation. The future of the courthouse has been a controversial debate locally. The placement of another hotel or two Downtown was seen as a major anchor to spur development and align with the cultural entertainment draw - festivals and events - in the area. Some of the better quality warehouses near Downtown could be earmarked for adaptive reuse.

Parking was discussed at length – parking would be necessary for commercial development and residential infill-- how would this be addressed? There are multiple parking lots in the Downtown core now, but people don't necessarily want or need surface parking taking up developable land. In some cases, more convenient parking was requested (though it is unclear how this would be achieved).

Much was discussed in terms of expanding what was considered Downtown. Specifically, better connections between Jefferson St. and Jefferson Blvd were highlighted – blurring Downtown across the Thruway and encompassing parts of McComb-Veazey, Nickerson and Parkerson. Also, connecting Downtown and the adjacent Freetown and Port Rico neighborhoods to the University was seen as an opportunity. Students occupy large portions of these neighborhoods and services could be introduced to foster those connections and activities. McKinley St. was mentioned as a targeted focal zone due to its history as a nucleus of University life – but do so now in a more mixed-use manner.

Local Assets

Restaurants
Libraries
Walkability/bike friendly/bike trail
Churches
Coffee shops
Schools
Women's Center
Lafayette Community Healthcare Clinic
Convenient
Friendly
Eclectic
Creative

Desirable Elements

Capitalize on attractions (historic, St. John's Cathedral)
Funding mechanisms and incentives for businesses
Expand art venues through promotion and attention brought from Art Walk
Local Grocery/Market (like Breau's)
Local theater to complement ACA
Address bar moratorium situation and impacts on appropriate economic development and safety
Connect Downtown to adjacent neighborhoods - Freetown (to campus), LaPlace and Northside

Challenges

Lack of parking downtown
Downtown is underutilized
Avoid wrong scales of development – make local and hopefully prevent gentrification

"Downtown is an employment center"

"We want the business that are migrating to the south to stay"

SAFETY

More police presence and increased patrolling could be a key factor to eliminate some of the crime and safety issues. Bike patrol would make police more accessible. It was stated that while police are more active on the weekends due to the nightlife, they are not present nearly as much during the week.

Residents and business owners felt that homeless population is a serious issue in the downtown area. It is perceived as poorly managed and needing more resources and funding to address the root of the problem. It was noted that not only was this a safety issue, but it was affecting businesses and deterring

families from coming downtown. Some participants mentioned active programs dealing with the homeless, but did not feel they were making a large enough impact on the situation. Most voiced a concern for the homeless population and felt that those that are truly homeless should have a place to go, a shelter, to get them off the streets.

Increased and more appropriately scaled lighting may deter some crime and would make the public feel safer in Downtown, Freetown and Port-Rico.

Desirable Elements/Specific Suggestions

Create a program, maybe a training center

Security lighting assessment

Benches designed to limit sleeping

Salt Lake City has a program to pick up homeless people at the shelters to take them to work projects

Tiny house community to house homeless population suggested

Challenges

Only see police when they are called

Less charity because then the homeless show up

I'd rather not see parks – they just bring in homeless individuals

Constant theft

Unemployment office

Drug dealers in district

Problem with homeless people in Park San Souci and Parc Putnam

E. Grant St. Train tracks – the area needs to be cleaned up to prevent homeless, parking, and safety issues are also a problem

“Needs to be policed”

“Homelessness problem needs real solutions.”

CULTURE AND HISTORY

Many participants spoke highly of the sense of community and historic character within the Downtown and the Freetown- Port-Rico district. Protecting the culture, diversity, and character of the neighborhood was extremely important to those who participated in the workshop. Many stated this community is extremely unique and cannot be found anywhere else in Lafayette.

Festivals and other community events were highly desirable and attracted many to the neighborhood. Most residents felt that all those living in the district wanted to be living within this district and are extremely dedicated members of the community.

Architecturally, the historical aesthetic should be maintained and improved on. Historic tax credits could be utilized to preserve several buildings in the district. The Federal Courthouse was mentioned specifically.

Several stakeholders suggested investment in neighborhood education and programs from the city. Many indicated a larger role from the city regarding tax credits, low-income tax credit, and other incentives would be extremely beneficial to the community.

Local Assets

On the parade route
Museums (ACA, Children's Museum)
Public Art
Multitude of events (Art Walk, Festivals, Bach Lunch)
Music venues
Borden's
Blue Moon

Desirable Elements/Specific Suggestions

Potential to use historical tax credit to revamp federal courthouse
Need more charity and philanthropic attention Downtown to address various issues
Evangeline Hotel is historical and connected to Cite des Arts
Utilize adjudicated properties for temporary uses

Challenges

"Dead spaces"
Don't want a mini River Ranch
Preserve diversity and culture
Stigma of the area

"We are a slow-paced neighborhood, but it's bustling. We have a good porch life"
"If it becomes more segregated, the character of the neighborhood is at risk"

ENTERTAINMENT (COMMERCIAL)

In many ways, there are a broader range of entertainment options in Downtown/Freetown-Port Rico as compared to other districts. The area boasts a very active nightlife and is home to a multitude of festivals and events. These events offer a variety of music and food options unique to the downtown area. While many residents appreciate the bars, there is a concern that adding more would have a negative impact on the district.

Despite the abundance of unique activities, the district lacks some of the staple entertainment options found elsewhere in the city.

Local Assets

Many festivals and events (Bach Lunch, Downtown Alive, Festival International)
Acadiana Center for the Arts
Music venues
Bars
Science Museum
Children's Museum

Desirable Elements

Movie theater
Kid friendly activities like laser tag and other games

Performing arts center

RECREATION & NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The Downtown area has several public parks that are considered an asset to the community. A drawback of these parks is that they contain very little green space. Residents would love to see more grass and trees, and less concrete.

In contrast, the Freetown/Port-Rico neighborhoods have virtually no public parks to speak of. Residents would love to see several green spaces available in the area. They would love to have simple places to relax and connect with friends and neighbors outdoors.

It was also discussed that there should be some public spaces that are of a more intimate and human scale.

Local Assets

Several public spaces
Streetscaping on Jefferson

Desirable Elements

More green space
Soccer fields, running tracks/trails, organized sports in the vicinity
Shade
Dog park
Playgrounds for kids
Skate Park
Outdoor/rooftop dining opportunities
Greenway adjacent to railroad

Challenges

There are no parks in Freetown/Port-Rico
Park Putnam is underutilized
Parks attract transients and animals

HOUSING

The drastic need for housing downtown was one of the most talked about issues at the workshop. In order to have a thriving, self-sufficient downtown, there needs to be a huge increase in mixed-income housing options. Many residents would also like to see an increase in the number of families living in the district. The market currently consists predominately of renters and residents would like to see more ownership in the community.

It was discussed that new buildings need to be sensitive to their surroundings and should fit in with the existing historic character of the community.

Desirable Elements

Affordable, mixed-income housing
More families
Maintain historic aesthetic in new housing

Challenges

High rent downtown
Houses are run down
Many renters, few homeowners
The Quarters does not fit in with existing context

BEAUTIFICATION

It was widely agreed upon that overall beautification of the district should be a priority. General beautification could dramatically affect people's perception of the neighborhood and therefore help spur further economic development and continued growth. The many bars and festivals downtown have contributed to a substantial amount of litter. Residents would like to see more trash cans in the area to help combat this problem.

Residents widely support the streetscaping on Jefferson Street and would like to see it extended to other areas of the community. Additionally, more landscaping in public parks is desired.

There is a moderate amount of public art downtown that actively contributes to the cultural atmosphere. There is a desire to see more art downtown, as well as a desire to extend art into the Freetown-Port Rico neighborhoods. Many participants expressed a strong desire for substantial gateway signage welcoming visitors to the district.

Local Assets

Jefferson streetscape
Public art

Desirable Elements

Overall beautification
More public art
Landscaping in parks
Buried utilities
Better overall maintenance
Address vacant buildings and lots
Extend Jefferson streetscape
Preserve trees (especially from power lines)
Beautify and improve connection between downtown and UL Lafayette
Better lighting

Challenges

Litter issues, too few trashcans
Noise levels are high around the bars

INFRASTRUCTURE

Residents at the workshop debated back and forth whether or not there was sufficient parking downtown. Regardless which side, it was widely accepted that there is too much surface parking and not enough on-street parking. It was also noted that there is not suitable parking for events that occur in the district.

The Jefferson streetscape is widely appreciated, but most of the other sidewalks have largely been neglected. In many areas, sidewalks are not handicap accessible due to elevation changes. Additionally, telephone poles and other objects create obstructions that make navigating the pedestrian network difficult.

Many areas in Freetown have open ditch drainage in place. Many residents would like to see these covered for both safety and aesthetic reasons.

One resident suggested converting Johnston Street into a boulevard from the University intersection to the railroad tracks. This would be a dramatic beautification project for the area and it would also help to slow down traffic. The slower traffic would make it easier for pedestrians to walk between downtown and Freetown.

Local Assets

Rosa Parks

Desirable Elements

Sidewalk and crosswalk improvement (handicap accessible)

Drainage improvements (no open ditches)

Better parking infrastructure, less surface parking

Parking benefit district

Road sign and street light audit needed

Streetscaping to slow traffic

Roundabouts

Bus shelters

Street car

Challenges

Not pedestrian friendly in all areas

Sidewalk obstructions are common

Poor lighting

Event parking

Poor road conditions

Speeding

ACCESS/MOBILITY/CONNECTIVITY

Almost all participants indicated connectivity across all districts and to other parts of the city is a major need. The thruway and railroad currently create a barrier between the downtown area and McComb-Veazey that makes pedestrian, bike, and even vehicular connectivity difficult. Major streets, like

Johnston St. and Congress St., limit pedestrian and bike connectivity. Many felt that connecting downtown to the UL campus is crucial.

Lack of bus shelters was a main complaint of the participants. Many felt that this made using city transportation undesirable. With so many residents of this district and the surrounding districts relying on the bus system, better access to city transportation is a serious need. Additionally, handicap accessible bus stops, a better bus schedule, and more clarity regarding the bus schedule and routes were mentioned as needed..

In many places, the streets are simply wider than they need to be. Having narrower lanes would help to slow down heavy traffic and create a safer experience for pedestrians. Crossing some streets (Congress and the Evangeline Thruway) are quite dangerous. Heavy traffic and excess speeding make traveling between districts difficult. Some residents would like to see McKinley St. become opened to two-way traffic. Crosswalks are not pedestrian friendly or audible for blind access. Larger more appropriately scaled crosswalks will enhance the ability for pedestrians to move seamlessly between districts. In addition, both a bridge connecting Freetown to campus and a pedestrian bridge over the coulee were mentioned.

The district has an abundance of sidewalks, but the condition of many of them are not up to par. Many existing sidewalks have handicap accessibility issues and are riddled with obstacles. Improving the quality of the sidewalks would dramatically improve inter-neighborhood connectivity. Adding street trees and vegetation would greatly improve the pedestrian experience in these areas. Many residents would love to see a pedestrian connection realized over the railroad and Thruway.

The residents in this district are very active and commute regularly by bike. The Freetown/Port-Rico neighborhood is located directly between downtown and UL-Lafayette. This convenient location allows them the opportunity to bike instead of drive. General improvements to the overall bike network could be a great way to better connect residents to the surrounding areas. Designated bike lanes as well as signage could improve the networks effectiveness and safety.

Desirable Elements

Trolley to extend Jefferson (streetcar)
Needs connection to McComb-Veazey across tracks
Better crosswalks on Johnston and University
Night bus so that drinking and driving is reduced - give UL-L students a free bus pass to promote bus use
Bus to airport
McKinley needs to be changed to two-way traffic
Overpass Pedestrian Bridge – to connect neighborhoods
Pedestrian continuation at Lamar St.
Flashing pedestrian crossing lights by the Science Museum
Connect to Horse Farm
Would like more connectivity at 12th Street & Taft
Walking paths

Challenges

Bertrand has been restriped with bike lanes but the speed limit is still 45 which is too fast
Huge need for public transit. Not reliable and doesn't take you where you need to go

"I want to ride bus but it's hard to know where and when"

CONNECTOR-RELATED FEEDBACK

NOTES ON THE EVANGLINE THRUWAY (EXISTING & FUTURE USE)

- The Evangeline Thruway is depressingly sad and heart breaking. Depressed property value. The dead space hurts.
 - Displaced people – "Where the hell are they gonna go?"
 - Don't have a destination to bike/walk to, so don't cross it
 - Generally they use Taft to get onto the thruway but use Mudd and Cameron.
 - Others avoid the Thruway at all costs. Some use the underpass (at Jefferson).
 - Cross the Thruway? Only in a car. Get killed if try to cross. Traffic is too fast. Always accidents.
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Future Repurposed Thruway

- Residents want to see mixed-use buildings and businesses along the Thruway

NOTES ON CONNECTOR PROPOSALS (INCLUDING THRUWAY)

Environment

- There are also concerns about toxic waste and the Chicot Aquifer. Will that been addressed before the overpass is built and how?
- Possible Chicot Aquifer contamination.
- Concerns about the impact of the are during construction phase of overpass.

Traffic

- Traffic on and off is a concern. Exit ramps- getting traffic off and adjusting to neighborhood speed.
- Increase barrier and increase traffic (problem).
- Off on ramp at Taft.
- Concerned about new, high-traffic streets for cut-through traffic.
- Should be an interchange at Johnston and corridor – if not, all the traffic will have to go somewhere to get to Johnston.
- Slow traffic down at old Thruway.
- Reduce Thruway to fewer lanes, more pedestrian access.

Levels

- Reconcile level 2 with level 3 as much as possible.
- Extend the concept of level 2 further toward University.

Connectivity

- Continuation of disconnectivity? Let's not continue this among the neighborhoods. Don't want I-49 to separate neighborhoods. Connection must serve the neighborhood. Not just connection for connection's sake.
 - We don't want to be further disconnected from downtown.
 - (Access to services) There is fear of losing connectivity to the Public Library.
 - There's a concern that the increase in heavy and fast traffic from the interstate ramps will add to neighborhood disconnectivity.
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- Possible berm connectors over (pedestrian/bike).
 - 3 connections should be Johnston, Cameron, and Pinhook Sts..
 - I-49 – Congress should be under the railroad – OK to get over with good sidewalks.
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- Connect 12th St. across Thruway.
 - There's a fear that the interstate connector will further separate the neighborhoods.
 - Fewest exits and ramps as possible

Noise/Pollution

- Fumes from trucks – safe for basketball underneath?
- Noise concern – this will only be amplified. Freeway will make downtown have more noise.
- Could there be a Quiet Zone? Have signs posted?
- Encapsulate (the highway) would help with noise.
- Shrimp and Petroleum Festival in Morgan City – great festival and don't hear the trucks even though it is right below the highway.
- Wouldn't want to lose the charm of the festivals and music events because of interstate noise.

Safety

- Freetown and LaPlace decent, petty theft from homes but lighting could help. Have seen an improvement through the years. If get rid of blighted areas and clean up, then crime would decrease.
- Secure and safe under highway.
- Safety concerns drawing people under the underpass.
- Homeless under the interstate?
- Feel crime will be increased with an elevated interstate.
- No parks under because not enough light. Have to be well lit.

Aesthetics

- Don't use any artificial facades on any structure you're trying to hide – rather than hiding empty space, put something useable there.
- Want connector as narrow as possible.
- If elevated, at least 3-4 stories high.

Alternatives

- Create a two-way grand boulevard in certain areas (Texas, Chicago, Paris) as a solution to the elevated interstate. The Boulevard could be an improvement to the Evangeline Thruway and would attract new business
 - Clean up the Thruway and put the freeway somewhere else. Serious concerns of the impact of the elevated freeway.
 - Octavia Blvd in California and West Side Blvd in New York were cited as good examples of things done right.
 - Potentially use the Houston interstates as examples to reference.
 - Follow the example of Brooklyn and the Queens Expressway.
 - Or buried/capped with green space and boulevard on top.
- Underpass – do we need that many for only five miles? It's a lot of area that would be affected due to its residential nature. Have underpasses away from residential areas.